**Gone, But Always Present**

**(The Power of Story in the Bible)**

**Text: Luke 24:44-53**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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I have a confession to make. For most of my life – even as a little kid – I’ve had trouble with the story of the Ascension. I’m maybe 5 years old and my mother is telling me about how Jesus was with his disciples for 40 days after Easter, and then he was lifted-up into heaven. And I’m thinking, “Wait a minute. People don’t just blast off from earth like that unless they’re sitting on top of a rocket!”

I don’t know; maybe I had an imagination deficiency. How many of you all remember the t.v. show *Friendly Giant*? It was an educational show that my dad made me watch when I wanted to watch cartoons. The star, Robert Homme, portrayed a giant named Friendly. He would appear on the screen surrounded by all sorts of miniature props, and I remember thinking, “That’s not a giant; it’s a normal sized man. And how come he wants me to sit down in that doll house furniture?

Like I said, I had an imagination deficiency. Which can be a real problem when you’re reading the scriptures. The stories in the Bible invite us to wonder about a Reality that we can never fully grasp with our minds. These stories draw us out of ourselves and point us toward the Creator of all things; the Ground of all things, the One in whom all things live and move and have their being. It takes imagination to do that. Bible stories grab a hold of our imagination and invite us into a transcendent realm that’s not only real, it’s Really Real.

Bible stories like the Ascension. I still have trouble with it…if it’s read as a literal account of what happened to the Risen Lord. But, if it’s read as a parable, or an allegory, it can draw our hearts and minds to a place where we can be still with God, and be empowered by God, to be engaged right here in the real world, as the hands and feet of Jesus.

Let’s first of all consider this notion of scripture as parable or allegory. Then let’s try to unpack the meaning of the Ascension, viewed as an allegory. Let’s especially unpack its meaning for us, the body of Christ, gathered at the corner of 15th and K Streets, today.

The notion that every word in the Bible is literally true, that all of the events depicted in the Bible actually happened, is a fairly recent idea. It’s been around for maybe 350 years. For *most* of the church’s history, many of the stories in the Bible have been viewed as allegories. An allegory is “a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning.” That’s how the dictionary defines it. That Bible has *lots* of stories, poems and pictures that reveal a hidden meaning. It’s a compilation of stories that reveal how much God loves us, how much God loves the whole world; a whole library of stories that tell us how God created the world out of love, sent Jesus into the world to reveal that love, and is with us still – as the Holy Spirit – embracing us in love. The *essential* hidden meaning is this: God is love. But it takes a myriad of stories and poems and images and metaphors to fully implant that good news in our hearts, and to draw our imaginations toward the Divine, that we might be open to the next new thing that God will do.

Now, we don’t have a problem with this when we think of Jesus’ parables. Lots of folks who are biblical literalists view Jesus’ parables as really good stories that teach us about the love of God, and the Kingdom of God, and our responsibilities as the people of God. Folks might argue about whether or not other stories should be taken literally, like Adam and Eve, or Norah’s Ark, or Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth, but I’ve never heard anyone insist that the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son, or any other parable of Jesus actually happened. No; we recognize these as good stories, created out of Jesus’ imagination, so that our hearts and minds might be drawn closer to God.

Well, the allegorical approach to scripture says that we should think of *many* of the stories of the Bible that way. All of scripture is hung on an historical framework, and some of it really is history, but some of the stories are parables. They are *amazing* stories, inspired by God, nurtured in the imaginations of the biblical writers, and offered to the Church. These stories reveal the heart of God to us. And they invite our hearts into communion with the Divine.

Which brings us to the story of the Ascension; the *allegory* of the Ascension, if you will. Which, by the way, Luke himself makes clear is more like a good story than an historic fact, because he tells it two different ways. Luke is the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Luke/Acts is a two-volume work about the good news of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ. In his gospel, Luke has the Ascension happening very late on Easter night. In Acts, Luke has it happening 40 days later. Check it out when you get home. When you read the entire 24th chapter of Luke straight through, from the Empty Tomb to the Ascension, you’ll see that all of the events depicted there happen on the same day. Compare that to Acts 1, where Luke repeats the story of the Ascension, but this time he has it happening 40 days after the Resurrection. This, of course, is not a problem for Luke, because he knows that he’s speaking in allegory. He realized – at some point after he finished the gospel but before he started Acts – he realized that by writing 40 days of resurrection appearances into the story, he could better illustrate the way in which the Risen Christ appears in the Church and the world over and over again. Good authors change stories all the time. J.R.R. Tolkien rewrote part of *The Hobbit* in order to reconcile it with his later work, *The Lord of the Rings*. That’s the way it is with good literature. And the Bible is the *best* literature! Only the best literature could reveal God’s Word.

So, Luke knows that the Ascension is allegory, not history. He knows that the reader knows this. But what is he trying to reveal to the reader? I think Luke is telling the reader – or, better yet, God is telling the Church through Luke’s words – that the Creator and the Son are one. Jesus ascends to heaven, which is to say that Jesus returns to the Creator, from whence he came. Henceforth, Jesus reigns in glory with the Creator, offering the Church wisdom and power to serve the Kingdom of God on earth. As the man Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord could only be in one place at one time. But present within that man was wisdom and power that now – *post* Ascension – the whole Church can draw upon; indeed, the whole world can draw upon. When Luke depicts the Risen Lord as returning to the Creator, he is drawing our imaginations toward the Creator, from whence commeth the inspiration, the energy and the courage to do deeds of great power in the world.

You see, as long as I thought Jesus was simply a great teacher, I thought it was all up to me to try to be like Jesus. I had to do it under my own power. But somewhere along the line I realized that Jesus is a conduit to the power and the joy and the presence of God. We are embraced by God through Christ. We are empowered by God through Christ. And how do we know this? Because Jesus has ascended to heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. It’s all highly symbolic language, to be sure; but it’s *powerful* language; language that opens our hearts and our minds and whole lives to the presence and the power of God! It’s language who’s power is revealed in experience when we act as if it is true. All things are possible through the One who is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. But you’ll never know this unless you act like it. And then you’ll see amazing things happening; God-inspired things happening. They’re happening all the time, but we need the stories in the Bible to help open our minds, our hearts and our eyes to such things. And when we do become aware of the amazing things that God is doing all around us, we realize that there is a power at work in our midst that can do far more abundantly than anything that we might ask or image (Ephesians 3:20). It’s not all up to me; no, not even close. Power flows from God, through Jesus Christ who reigns with God. That’s what the Ascension is all about.

So what does this mean for Bedford-First Christian Church? What does this mean for this particular manifestation of the body of Christ that gathers for worship and work each week at the corner of 15th and K Streets? Well, we have some exciting challenges before us. We have a new mission before us that will require deeds of great power in order for it to be accomplished; power that comes from on high. It’s the mission of revitalizing our Camp. It’s the mission of expanding our Faith Formation ministry. It’s the mission of reaching outward to connect people with God’s abundance. And we’re starting to do it. More accurately, the Spirit is starting to do it: through us and through our partners in Bedford and in the Indiana Region. It’s the mission that’s outlined in Our Future Story. And it’s all possible. It’s possible because we “have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). It is possible because the Holy Spirit has come upon us. The promise that Jesus made to the disciples just before the Ascension has been fulfilled: the power of the Holy Spirit has come upon us, and upon the whole Church. It is the power to proclaim repentance and forgiveness and all manifestations of God’s abundance to all nations; to all sorts of people beyond our walls. Proclaiming good news to them, and welcoming them, starting right here in downtown Bedford. That power is available to the Church, through the One who transformed death into new life. Because he is now delegating Royal Power from his new post: seated at the right hand of the throne of God. That’s what the Ascension means.

The late New Testament scholar Marcus Borg once said that Christians would do themselves a great favor if we stopped arguing about whether or not a biblical story really happened, and focus instead on what that story means. If we can hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church through that story today, that it doesn’t really matter what may or may not have happened 2,000 years ago. If we can receive the power of the Spirit through those stories, then all things really are possible. Our job is to act as if the power is real. Because it is. Amen.